

VZCZCXR07963

PP RUEHPW

DE RUEHBUL #0313/01 0420426

ZNR UUUUU ZZH

P 110426Z FEB 09

FM AMEMBASSY KABUL

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7327

INFO RUCNAFG/AFGHANISTAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 KABUL 000313

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

KABUL FOR COS USFOR-A

STATE FOR SCA/FO, SCA/A, S/CRS

STATE PASS TO USAID FOR AID/ANE, AID/DCHA/DG

NSC FOR JWOOD

OSD FOR MCGRAW

CG CJTF-101, POLAD, JICCEN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: KDEM PGOV AF

SUBJECT: IEC "SATISFIED" WITH VOTER REGISTRATION AFTER
VISIT TO SOUTH

REF: A. KABUL 000237

1B. 08 KABUL 003280

1C. KABUL 000083

11. (SBU) Two senior officials of the Independent Election Commission (IEC), with ISAF support, traveled February 2-4 to Helmand, Kandahar, and Uruzgan to monitor voter registration operations, reach out to voters and key political figures, and assess the neuralgic question of equitable Pashtun participation in the electoral process. At the visit's conclusion, Zekria Barakzai, the IEC's Deputy Chief Technical Officer, pronounced that he and acting head of field operations Zamari Qalamiar weQ "satisfied" with voter registration in the south. Barakzai identified immediate measures the IEC will take to increase women's participation and explore the possibility of voter registration in Baghram, a populous Helmand district inaccessible to the government. Barakzai also noted "lessons learned" for election operations in provinces where anti-government forces are active.

12. (SBU) The trip allowed IEC headquarters officials to meet with regional and provincial election staff, inspect provincial office operations, and observe voter registration at sites in the capitals. The IEC in each province also met with the governor or deputy governor, provincial council members, Afghan police and army chiefs, and, except in Kandahar, local community leaders. Noor Ali Jaberkhail, who manages relations with governors for the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG) and who worked as a technical expert on previous elections, accompanied the IEC officials. Diplomats from the US, UK, and Netherlands Embassies in Kabul, as well as a USAID representative, joined the delegation for selected meetings in Helmand, and had separate meetings in Kandahar and Uruzgan.

ADAPTING VOTER OUTREACH TO SUIT THE SOUTH

13. (SBU) "I tell my people that the voter registration card is a political weapon," a tribal leader announced to the delegation in Lashkar Gah. "It can be used against your enemy and for your friend." The senior judge in Tarin Kowt led an audience of local dignitaries in reciting Koran verses saying Islam forbids changing political leaders by the sword. As a result of such colorful exchanges, the IEC resolved to adjust its outreach and education campaign in the south, focusing on simple, direct messages and emphasizing interviews and dialogs on key broadcast stations over the more abstract media spots and printed materials developed at IEC headquarters. Barakzai authorized provincial staff to immediately contract additional jingle truck loudspeaker

broadcasts in Kandahar and Uruzgan. On February 10, Kandahar and Helmand radio stations, with US Embassy funding, will begin broadcasting spots featuring interviews with the Deputy Minister of Haj, the Minister of Women Affairs, and a religious scholar. The Australian government is funding additional outreach for women voters in Uruzgan.

¶4. (SBU) Barakzai praised Governor Mangal as "a blessing from God" for his frequent travel to Helmand's outlying districts to encourage voters to participate, and asked Jaberkhail to have IDLG push other Phase 4 governors to be more active in outreach. IEC local officials reported the strategy of using religious leaders as civic educators has proved successful; in Kandahar, the chief and deputy chief of the council of religious scholars (ulema) are IEC staff. Two Kandahar council members, not employed by the IEC, were killed after preaching mosque sermons encouraging women to register to vote, but local observers are not certain whether voter registration or the continuing campaign against moderate religious figures was the cause.

¶5. (SBU) Barakzai pressed forward several measures the IEC will adopt to facilitate women's participation in voter registration and elections given the region's restrictive social norms. The IEC will provide women-only transportation for female election workers in urban areas, for example, and fund the travel of the socially-obligatory male guardians (muharrams) for women workers in remote areas. The Kandahar PRT provided portable toilets for female staff, removing another key constraint. Sahima Sahafee, a Helmandi provincial council member, stressed that mobile teams are key to women's ability to participate. The IEC instructed the

KABUL 00000313 002 OF 003

Helmand provincial office to assign more mobile teams to women, and in both Helmand and Kandahar election staff will advertise more widely the procedure communities use to request a mobile team.

COUNTING PASHTUNS IN

¶6. (SBU) In the Phase 4 provinces of Helmand, Kandahar, Uruzgan, and Nimroz, 259,925 new voters joined the rolls by February 8, putting this Pashtun-dominated region on track to parallel the participation rate in other regions (REF A.) Demand to register to vote remains high despite the risk of violence and voter intimidation. In the remote and unstable district of Khas Uruzgan, new voters are lining up in the snow. Helmandi tribal leaders report that residents of remote Taliban-dominated areas are coming to Lashkar Gah to register, even though the city sites are so busy the farmers sometimes must wait two or three days to sign up.

¶7. (SBU) In Musa Qala, Afghan and international observers quietly agree that local Taliban are registering to vote. In Kandahar city, rural voters are storing their cards with trusted trading partners to thwart Taliban efforts to confiscate the document. The south's Regional Electoral Officer (REO), Washi Alikozai, notes that some 100 Afghans cross the Iranian border each day to register in Zaranj, and as many as 300 each day cross the Pakistani border to register in Spin Boldak. In Spin Boldak demand is so high the IEC is opening an additional site.

¶8. (SBU) Kandahari political rivalry among supporters of Ahmad Wali Karzai, the President's brother, and Gul Agha Sherzai, now Governor of Nangarhar, is prompting both tribes to rally to register to vote, experts say. So far, the IEC appears to be managing well enough the demand for equal access produced by the region's complex web of tribes. Barakzai, the IEC's number two administrator, intimately understands the politics of Pashtuns (REF B); he belongs to a southern Pashtun tribe, attended high school in Kandahar, and has large family landholdings in Farah. Barakzai spoke more

than two hours to rebut the skepticism of Kandahar provincial council members about election security, and left the gathering with a promise that each member of this diverse group would encourage constituents to register.

Representatives of nine different tribes in Helmand all confirmed they, and their extended family networks, have voter cards. The IEC delegation heard out the complaints of tribal elders from the five inaccessible Helmand districts, and is planning to engage the leader of Baghram, the most populous area, to secure access for a mobile registration team.

¶9. (SBU) As in other regions (REF C), equal access will continue to be a thorny issue. REO Washi, who earns high marks from IEC headquarters for his understanding of local tribal politics, notes that in "mixed" areas still more work is needed. Some Kandaharis complain all the election workers are from the REO's Alikozai tribe. In Uruzgan, the IEC belatedly is working to open a center in Ghandab for the small Hazara community living some 40 kilometers from the site in Khas Uruzgan district. In Helmand, the Hazara deputy chief of the provincial council complained he had not seen even one Hazara working at the IEC provincial office.

THINKING AHEAD TO ELECTIONS

¶10. (SBU) The IEC delegation identified three points for future cooperation with Afghan security forces and ISAF on election security. First, the region's election officials and security force chiefs agree a "good environment" across the south is key to building public confidence in the run-up to voting day. Second, the police are too few and lack leadership and resources, especially in Uruzgan; Barakzai plans to let the Interior Ministry and the Palace know of this concern. Intelligence and military representatives in Uruzgan were especially disgusted that, after a suicide bomber disguised as a policeman attacked a police station on February 2, the police stood by and refused even to remove the corpses from the scene. Third, the IEC wants to see closer and more timely cooperation between itself, Afghan

KABUL 00000313 003 OF 003

security forces, and ISAF for logistics and security support, especially at the headquarters level.

¶11. (SBU) To improve election operations, the IEC headquarters hopes to use ISAF transportation support to conduct more oversight missions in the south and elsewhere. The IEC also plans to supervise staff training more closely, forestalling procedural errors such as the underage registrations detected in Uruzgan. IEC officials note that, across the region, a shortage of skilled, literate workers poses a challenge; if possible, it may develop incentives to allow it to transfer in staff from other Pashto-speaking areas. For women staff, especially, the IEC plans to raise salaries, now set at \$200 per month, to attract more workers from the small pool of suitable candidates. At the provincial level, for the vote count, IEC offices need to add storage space, purchase more satellite phones to transmit results to headquarters, and replace some unreliable equipment from the voter registration process.

WOOD